

## AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions and listings of claims in this application.

## LISTING OF CLAIMS

Claim 1. (currently amended) A method for acquiring ~~and distributing~~ natural gas in ~~relatively~~ large quantities by a gas utility company, wherein the purchase of gas from a gas producer ~~and to be distributed by said utility~~ is financed by an intermediary entity, and wherein the purchased gas is distributed to the gas utility company's customers, said method comprising the steps of:

- negotiating at least one of the purchase, transport and storage cost of said gas by one of said utility company and said intermediary entity;

- determining a quantity of gas to be purchased based at least in part on historic demand data for gas in a geographic territory served by said utility company;

- acquiring funds to pay for gas purchased by said intermediary entity by issuing debt instruments by said intermediary entity through financial markets;

- providing payment by said intermediary entity for said gas and taking title to said gas by said intermediary entity;

- carrying out one of transporting said gas to a storage facility and identifying said gas at a predetermined storage facility;

- determining gas deliverability capacity of said storage facility by selected measurements of gas pressure at said storage facility to provide for scheduling one of repayment and rollover of said debt instruments;

- assessing the risk of receiving payment from said utility by said intermediary entity based on selected parameters of said geographic territory;

- delivering gas to the utility company's customers;

- collecting payments by said intermediary entity from said utility company for gas delivered to the utility company's customers in accordance with a sales contract between said utility company and said intermediary entity; and

conducting one of repayment and rollover of debt instruments at maturities thereof by said intermediary entity utilizing funds received from said utility company pursuant to said sales contract.

Claims 2 and 3(canceled)

Claim 4. (previously presented) The method set forth in Claim 1 wherein:

said parameters are determined for subdivisions of said geographic territory defined by postal service code.

Claim 5. (previously presented) The method set forth in Claim 1 wherein:

said parameters are selected from a group consisting of population, residential housing units, retail merchant space, industrial production space, household income and sales tax receipts of said geographic.

Claim 6. (previously presented) The method set forth in Claim 1 wherein:

said parameters are selected from a group consisting of historical heating/cooling degree days, present weather forecast, and historical weather by one of an hourly and daily basis within said geographic.

Claim 7. (currently amended) The method set forth in Claim 1, wherein:

the parameters are selected from a group consisting of population, residential housing units, retail merchant space, industrial production space, household income and sales tax receipts of said geographic; and

including the steps of:

forecasting demand patterns for gas to be withdrawn from storage based on the parameters ~~set forth in one of Claims 5 and 6~~ and comparing said demand patterns with the capability of withdrawal of gas from said storage facility by a facility operator, and deriving a gas release schedule in consideration of the forecasting and comparing.

Claim 8. (original) The method set forth in Claim 7 including the step of:

notifying said facility operator of requirements to release gas from storage in accordance with ~~a schedule derived from the steps of Claim 7~~ the derived schedule.

Claim 9. (previously presented) The method set forth in Claim 1 including the step of:  
forecasting expected cash flows from customers serviced by said utility in said geographic.

Claim 10. (currently amended) The method set forth in Claim 9 including the steps of:  
determining the requirements for one of issuance and reissuance of debt instruments and at least one of monetary amounts thereof and maturity dates thereof and issuing debt instruments as required to finance the purchase of said gas by said intermediary entity and corresponding to expected cash flows to said intermediary entity from said utility company.

Claim 11. (currently amended) The method set forth in Claim 1 including the steps of:  
determining an interest rate to be one of charged to said utility company and paid on said debt instruments by assessing risks of loss by said intermediary entity, said risks of loss selected from a group consisting of interest rate risk, default on repayment of said debt instruments risk, maturity schedule of debt instruments risk, injection, storage and deliverability of said gas risk, gas measurement risk, physical loss of said gas during transmission and in storage risk, business conditions risk and economic risk.

Claim 12. (currently amended) The method set forth in Claim 11 including the steps of:  
determining an interest rate to be charged to said utility company based on one or more of said risks.

Claim 13. (original) The method set forth in Claim 11 including the step of:  
assigning a weight value to selected ones of said risks and determining a composite risk value.

Claim 14. (original) The method set forth in Claim 1 including the steps of:  
determining the anticipated producing rate of gas for storage in said storage facility and determining the dollar volume of debt instruments available periodically based on said rate of production and delivery to storage.

Claim 15. (previously presented) The method set forth in Claim 1 including the steps of:

monitoring said gas pressure and fill quantities in said storage facility to determine storage facility performance and determining the extent of rollover of debt instruments as said debt instruments reach maturity based on said storage facility performance.

Claim 16. (currently amended) The method set forth in Claim 1 including the step of:

monitoring the aging of accounts receivable of said utility company to determine the risk associated with said intermediary entity achieving a predetermined return on investment.

Claim 17. (currently amended) The method set forth in Claim 1 including the step of:

acquiring data with respect to said utility company related to historical daily temperatures in said geographic territory to determine the parameters of expected placement of gas in storage and withdrawal of gas from storage for said utility company.

Claim 18. (new) The method set forth in Claim 1, wherein:

said parameters are selected from a group consisting of historical heating/cooling degree days, present weather forecast, and historical weather by one of an hourly and daily basis within said geographic; and

including the steps of:

forecasting demand patterns for gas to be withdrawn from storage based on the parameters and comparing said demand patterns with the capability of withdrawal of gas from said storage facility by a facility operator, and deriving a gas release schedule in consideration of the forecasting and comparing.

Claim 19. (new) The method set forth in Claim 18 including the step of:

notifying said facility operator of requirements to release gas from storage in accordance with the derived schedule.